

Daily Herald, April 14, 2004

A vote today on an effort to reform the region's transportation agencies may lead to "open warfare" and "Armageddon" between Chicago and the suburbs, and between Democrats and Republicans, leaders from both sides are warning.

At issue is an alleged power grab - alleged by suburban Republicans - that would benefit Gov. Rod Blagojevich.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, a Highland Park Republican, predicts the move would take \$100 million from suburban-centered Metra train and Pace bus services and give it to the Chicago Transit Authority. Democrats dispute that contention and accuse Republicans and bureaucrats of resisting needed change.

The dispute heated up Monday at a meeting of a Blagojevich-commissioned panel as it tried to hash out how to fix the region's congestion.

It could reach a climax with today's vote - or fade away if Republican House Speaker Dennis Hastert steps in, as some Republicans are hoping.

Little discussion over the past several months by the panel has focused on actual traffic solutions. Instead, it has evolved into partisan bickering.

"If you do this, you break open-warfare (between the parties)," Kirk said Monday to U.S. Rep. William Lipinski, a Chicago Democrat chairing the panel.

Lipinski pointed to the panel's Democratic majority and responded: "We could have given the Collar Counties nothing."

Kirk responded: "I think you would like to do that if you could get away with it."

The tense exchange between the pair, who frequently cooperate on transportation, surrounded a series of measures backed by Lipinski. The most significant could give majority power to Chicago Democrats on the board of the Regional Transportation Authority, which oversees funding for Metra, Pace and the CTA.

Since the idea surfaced last week, Republican county board leaders from DuPage, Kane, Lake, McHenry and Will counties, as well as every Republican state senator, have unified against it, arguing it upsets the delicate city-suburb, Democrat-Republican balances that have existed for two decades.

Lipinski and other Democrats, including state Sen. Susan Garrett of Lake Forest, say the changes would give fairer representation to all parts of the region, including the suburbs, and create accountability - resting with the governor - for the alphabet soup of planning, advisory and service agencies whose uncoordinated efforts have left the region stuck in traffic.

Garrett, a possible swing on the panel's vote today, said she'll make sure the suburbs don't lose out. "I won't vote for it if safeguards aren't in place," she said.

Last year, Hastert stopped a bid by Cook County board President John Stroger to wrest more transit power, and Monday suburban Republicans sought the powerful Yorkville congressman's help again. "I just got off the phone with the staff of the speaker's office, and they do not support it," Kirk said of the proposed RTA changes late Monday.